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Response Paper 1, “The House of Mirth”

*The House of Mirth* by Edith Wharton explored the value of financial security and the importance of a high societal ranking among the socially elite. Lilly Bart, the main character of the novel, was no exception to the binds of society. She exemplified what a woman of her time was supposed to look, act, and dress like. Appearance and demeanor were everything to Lily because it, “was her only defense against” the other social climbers in her circle (25). However Lily’s beauty was not only for visual pleasure, but rather it was her ticket into the upper class she so desperately wanted to be part of. The significance *The House of Mirth* placed on society, a woman’s dependency, and financial stability clarifies the standards by which men and women were held to during the nineteenth century.

The idea of financial stability being associated with good and freedom of societal expectation being associated with happiness was a major theme in *The House of Mirth*. The fact is Lilly could not truly submit herself to the unhappy standards set by her counterparts. She often expressed, “how dreary and trivial these people were,” along with her boredom towards her day to day obligations (49). Lily desired love, but wanted to escape a life of dinginess and financial obligations. This fact became evident in the relationship she had with Selden. Because Selden was not financially endowed to the magnitude of Lily’s hopes, he considerably had nothing to offer her. Lily often expressed he frustration with Selden by stating, “Why do you make the things I chosen seem hateful to me, if you have nothing to give me instead? (63)” Selden created doubts in Lilly for wanting to be financially stable in a loveless marriage. Selden had a hold over her and as calculated as she was, she could not overcome it.

*The House of Mirth* amplified society as a, “revolving body which is apt to be judged according to its place in each man’s heaven,” and made it evident that, “at the present it was turning its illuminated face to Lily (44).” But Lily was not prepared to take her place in society, so society got tired of Lily. Lily was falling out of the comforting hands of the upper class and into a harsh reality. She reflected many times at the points in her life she had wealthy marriageable men at her disposal. Lily had many opportunities and the skills in life to be married but passed them up. She began to come to the realization that she had let a life of dinginess, “creep up on [her] and drag [her] down,” the very thing her mother had warned her about (31).

In conclusion, Lily is a part of society that is unforgiving when it comes to social standing and financial stability. Lily as a woman must urge herself to be married but her want for societal freedom is becoming a vocational hazard. Lily has a choice, but throughout the novel is hesitant to make one, life of dinginess or life of boredom. Lily is a woman of her time but seems to struggle with the rules of her time.